

Chapter 16

An Entrepreneurial Perspective of the Mesoamerican Civilizations: Implications for Latin America

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Abstract

Although scarce in the literature of entrepreneurship, the Aztec and Mayas (as well as the Incas), two of the most important civilizations in ancient Latin America, are considered by us as entrepreneurs. This is our departing point for understanding where entrepreneurship was born and built in Latin America. Unfortunately, its indigenous communities still are far behind in terms of labor, quality of life, poverty, and economic opportunities. From the ethnic entrepreneurship theory and after a deep literature review, a model is proposed for our region, a starting point to analyze and understand its processes in our region, thus making an impact on the development of public policies that can ultimately alleviate and improve the condition of this communities, and by going back to its roots, give a clearer picture of the reasons behind the present and future condition of entrepreneurship in Latin America.

Keywords: Ethnic entrepreneurship; Mesoamerican civilizations; trade; indigenous; Latin America; markets

Introduction

Management sciences have great challenges to understanding entrepreneurs who develop outside the rational logic of capitalism (Verduijn & Essers, 2013). Such is the case of indigenous people in the rural context, which is suggested to propose logic outside of a capitalist scheme, since they favor collectivism more than individualism, with greater symbolic and cultural value than economic value.

Many entrepreneurs in these contexts are artisans, farmers, ranchers, etc., who develop their trades with the knowledge that has passed down from generation to

generation. Many times, these activities reaffirm the ethnic identity of the entrepreneurs as well as provide the mechanisms for the preservation of ancient knowledge and traditions. Their importance not only lies in the economic aspect and the development that they can provide but in the meaning of their activities in the historical context and their contribution to the development of the identity of their communities (Romero & Valdez, 2016).

It is urgent to integrate into the debate of the study of the Latin American entrepreneurial phenomenon the context of the native indigenous/Mesoamerican individuals, both for its contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon and to generate mechanisms that allow this type of entrepreneurs to capitalize on the opportunities that the dynamics of the world currently implies. A required symbiosis.

In this sense, Dencker, Bacq, Gruber, and Haas (2021) call for the need to reconceptualize the dichotomy of an entrepreneur by necessity and by opportunity. It highlights that most of the entrepreneurship studies are done from entrepreneurship by opportunity and that both the theoretical developments and the empirical evidence of the various processes in which entrepreneurs by necessity are involved, with different sets of skills in different contexts, are scarce in the existing literature. It is even more so those of indigenous people, with their *sui generis* conceptualization.

A review of the theoretical bases of the entrepreneurial phenomenon shows a clear tendency to prioritize “agency over structure”; in other words, the attitude and capacity of the individual are privileged concerning their social and material context that guides it, when what is indicated is a sociomaterial approach where human agency, the material, and the social are explicitly handled as essential to the phenomenon (Bojórquez, Suárez-Núñez, & Flores-Novelo, 2019).

The ideological bases of the discourse insist that the impulse of entrepreneurial behavior empowers people to create and manage economic entities in an environment of freedom and flexibility, which will lead them both to improve their socioeconomic condition and to contribute to the growth and national welfare (Verduijn & Essers, 2013). The exacerbated discourse of the entrepreneur as an individual, risky, motivated, energetic, achievement-oriented, and proactive contains symbolic characteristics related to a romantic vision of capitalism, which seems to be a kind of mythological status related to success and even heroism (Hébert & Link, 1989) and has strong anthropocentric connotations (Martinez, Martin, & Marlow, 2018). Furthermore, given the intensity of the publications from Anglo-Saxon countries, it could also be associated with this cultural context.

Unlike Anglo-Saxon cultures, Mesoamerican indigenous cultures do not obey an individualistic logic, but rather a collective one. Nature is not perceived as a provider (supplier), but is integrated into the sociocultural reality, is part of daily rituals, and is strongly associated with spirituality.

An indigenous person who embarks on a venture with the idea of continuing with a family legacy, applying techniques that were passed down for generations, and developing an activity or service that provides identity and gratification for the accomplishment clearly cannot be classified as entrepreneurship by opportunity. Therefore, this type of entrepreneurship is usually classified as a necessary

one, although it is not a need in the economic sense that drives it. Perhaps it is the entrepreneurship of cultural identity.

The economic, cultural, and historical context means that the perception of opportunities of this type of entrepreneur does not follow the rational economic logic-oriented to profits, but rather the business activity is carried out to earn a living, to continue with a legacy, not to accumulate capital. What impact has this historical context of entrepreneurship or could it have on a reconfiguration of the region's perspective toward entrepreneurship?

Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the entrepreneurial phenomenon develops under the logic of indigenous peoples and to articulate their entrepreneurial capacities to promote changes in the economic, social, and cultural structure of their regions in a way that favors them and strengthens them as a wealth distribution mechanism.

This chapter reviews the history of commercial development in Mesoamerica since it is through trade that one can have an idea of the size and complexity of production and business agents in that era, and on the other hand, the history of trade is highly related to the history of entrepreneurship (Edwards, Bendickson, Baker, & Solomon, 2020).

In this sense, an exhaustive review of scientific publications that address the issue of ethnic entrepreneurship in Latin America was made, starting from the millennial past, rarely reviewed from an entrepreneurial perspective, and that accounts for the entrepreneurial legacy that our region has always had and that has been forgotten, or is not potentiated. Documents from different disciplines were reviewed, e.g., anthropological and sociological sciences seeking knowledge of indigenous entrepreneurs in the Mesoamerica context and scientific articles from the economic administrative area.

Section 1 addresses the entrepreneurial perspective in the Mesoamerican context, a novel view, so scarce in the literature; Section “[Entrepreneurial Perspective in the Mesoamerican Context](#)” looks at the breaking point, the Spanish Conquest Colonial Era, where two different worlds and logics collide and are juxtaposed, Section “[Colonial Era: Two Worlds, Two Logics in Juxtaposition](#)” makes a brief visit to the entrepreneurial ecosystem under an indigenous context in the present; Section “[Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Under an Indigenous Context](#)” takes on ethnic entrepreneurship in Latin America, where this topic also has been understudied; and finally Section “[Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Latin America](#)” presents our proposed model for approaching ethnic entrepreneurship in Latin America.

Entrepreneurial Perspective in the Mesoamerican Context

The contribution of the various Mesoamerican and Andean cultures in terms of inventions or discoveries is generally remembered, in addition to having been empires of great extension and influence. The Aztecs are acknowledged for their research on medicinal herbs, which resulted in the Badianus manuscript, compulsory education for its population, that illustrated more than 180 plants and trees to treat pain, cultivated on artificial islands (known as “chinampas”), which were floating gardens, free from drought.

The Mayan calendar (considered the most accurate) includes the number zero, astronomy (Lunar and Venus cycles, as well as eclipse forecasts), salt, and cocoa as coins.¹ All this accounts for the creativity, innovation, and therefore the entrepreneurship that these cultures generated and which led them to be great civilizations.

It is our position that to understand entrepreneurship in Latin America, it is necessary to start from its original conception of commerce, the economy, and well-being. From a business-oriented entrepreneurial perspective, in the Mesoamerican indigenous culture trade stood out as an activity with a great sociopolitical impact, and its development was the pillar that integrated the economic distribution and consumption system of the entire Mesoamerican region of pre-Columbian times (Fox, Cook, Chase, & Chase, 1996; Morgado, 2009).

Although there is a deficit of written documents that narrate the economic functioning of pre-Columbian times, anthropologists seem to agree that the importance of merchants was crucial for the political class, since their work allowed them a knowledge of the geographical, political, and cultural conditions, and economic and cultural backgrounds from various regions and acted as advisers for many empires, such as the Aztec (Hirth, 1998).

There is also evidence of the connections of commerce with spirituality. Kepecs (2015) reports evidence that supports the idea that indigenous people in Mexico considered trading and producing for commerce as a moral and divine obligation. The Gods Ek 'Chuah of the Mayan culture and Yacatecuhtli of the Aztecs represented the commercial activity. Its importance is recognized by various documents, for example, Ek Chuah was included as one of the 15 main Mayan deities, according to the classification elaborated by Paul Schellhas at the beginning of the nineteenth century (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Ek Chuah: Maya Trade God. *Source:* Photo taken at the Museo San José El Alto, Campeche City, Campeche, Mexico.

Hirth (1998) states that few civilizations in the ancient world gave as much importance to trade as in Mesoamerican civilizations. It highlights the stories of the Spaniards who described the Tlatelolco market (TIANQUIZ, “market” (Peñafiel, 1895), which are currently still being placed in some parts of Mexico City, today known as “Tianguis”) as something never seen in their travels around the world, due to its enormous size and the wide variety of products that could be found there. For its part, even today in Guatemala the Mayan markets continue to be established, as a remembrance of those of their ancestors.

One of the limitations to understanding the dynamics of markets in the indigenous context is that they are frequently described taking as reference Western frames, for example (Kepecs, 2015), comparing the economic model of the Mayans with the capitalism of Medieval Europe. Likewise, Hirth (2016a) reports that anthropologists frequently apply terms such as artisan guilds (referring to the workshops where artisans produced and sold their products) to the pre-Hispanic production and marketing systems of Mesoamerica, which is considered incorrect since they had great differences in the production, management, and commercial dynamics implied by an organization with a different logic from the European one. One of the characteristics of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica was their collective conception of property.

In this sense, the pre-Columbian indigenous market system took various forms, being that these commercial organizations made distribution and consumption efficient. Fig. 2 shows five different types of markets identified from the distributional approach.

According to Hirth (1998), the highly centralized exchanges took place in fixed or itinerant shopping malls. The first type is a commercial plaza (1), a market located in a fixed place where a large quantity and variety of merchandise was exhibited daily. These markets were in cities considered as shopping centers, located in strategic places, and where it is believed that wholesale transactions were carried out for their subsequent distribution to the territories in itinerant spaces called “tianguis,” which was a temporary and mobile structure. Because this form of the market leaves no “physical traces” for archeological studies, it has been poorly studied. However, it is a figure that can still be observed frequently in our days and that accounts for its importance and significance. Most of the exchanges took place in these commercial places where the relationships between sellers and buyers were unique and reciprocal to give equal access to commodities for all consumer units in the regions.

Other noncentralized commercial interactions occurred through commercial agents who did not dedicate all of their time to commerce and took the forms of commercial agents, like the sellers of small shops (2 and 3), production workshops and small shops (4), itinerant sellers, and (5) business partners who were in charge of delivering the goods.

Hirth (2016b) reports up to 124 different types of commercial agents in the central Mexican market (see Table 1), which confirms the developed and specialized nature of the Mesoamerican markets.

Likewise, vendors and producers with different roles allowed producers to organize their periods of production and consumption. Each product had its type

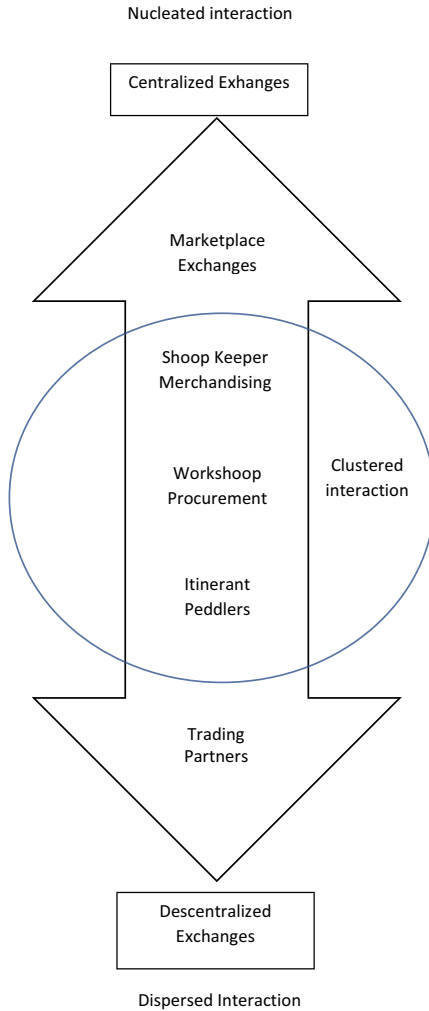


Fig. 2. Market Exchange Form in Mesoamerica.
Source: Adapted from Hirth (1998).

of distributor, and the Mesoamerican trade achieved an advanced level of consolidation. Maya merchants soon moved up the social ladder, establishing strong trading centers like Tikal. (It is worth noting that often invisible are those domestic entrepreneurs in Mesoamerican commerce.)

Since the scientific object studied in the field of entrepreneurship is dialogic of the individual and the creation of value, which is influenced by the environment

Table 1. Types of Producers and Sellers Found in Mexican Markets.

	Number	Percentage
Food producers	15	12.1
Processed food vendors	14	11.3
Collectors	20	16.1
Traditional craftsmen	56	45.2
Service providers	12	9.7
Others specialties	7	5.6
Total	124	100

Source: Hirt (2016b).

and takes place within a dynamic of internal and external change, it can be said that these commercial agents, sellers, and producers were the entrepreneurs of the Mesoamerican world. They assumed risks from transactions, explored paths for new trade contacts and merchandise, but above all they were a fundamental piece for politics and the economy.

Considering the above, these entrepreneurs (considered also by Alexander, 2008) in the indigenous context were the key to promoting an efficient distribution and consumption mechanism.² The commercial function was aimed at improving supply, the division of labor, the development of regional identity, and was also a space for social interaction. With the Spanish conquest, unfortunately, the economic system and the commercial structure of the Latin American communities underwent profound changes.

Colonial Era: Two Worlds, Two Logics in Juxtaposition

The economic development in the Mesoamerican peoples was not under the consumerist logic and cumulative feudal capitalism that characterized Europe. The conquering Spanish did not understand (or did not want to?) the economic and commercial dynamics of the region. Castillo Canché (2000) reports that a mayor in southeastern Mexico, at the time of the Spanish viceroyalty, described the Indians as idle people, without interest in money, or the comforts of human life, and stressed that they did not seem to be stimulated by increasing their belongings or clothing. This lack of interest in consumption and what in the opinion of the officials of the New Spain (Nueva España) was civilized life led to the characterization of indigenous people as idle, idiotic, and uncivilized (Castillo Canché, 2000).

In this era, the trading system that supported the economic distribution of indigenous peoples was dismantled. Although the Spanish accounts speak of markets, they do not describe their internal structure or how the sellers exercised their trade; the Spanish were more concerned with the type and quantity of goods sold than by the commercial structure (Cortés, 1962; Díaz del Castillo, 1956; Hirth, 2016b; López de Gómara, 1966).

Likewise, the Spanish incorporated into the economic dynamics the figure of the guilds, which were institutions to control the production and commercialization of products. They established a division of labor considering ethnic origin, which excluded mestizos, slaves, and Blacks from many productive activities, especially in the artisanal sphere (Konetzke, 1947). The Europeans kept the trades that in their opinion required nobility and prestige such as blacksmithing, locksmithing, and silverware (Nieto Sánchez, 2018), and the indigenous people focused on trades that implied more work and less profit such as pottery (Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, n.d.). Mesoamerican entrepreneurship died.

According to García (1984), indigenous artisan production at the beginning of the colonial era was organized through the logic of labor specialization; for this, the groups that already existed in pre-Columbian times took a figure that evokes that of guilds and had the function of keeping producers on an equal footing and preventing them from competing. The influence of these guilds was not only in production but also in marketing through mechanisms such as financing, credit, access, and raw materials, thereby establishing control of the production units. Under this productive conception, the producer is the absolute owner of the conditions of his work, and it is not subordinate to capital. In addition, its conception of a company is not individual, but as a group, and its actions are regulated by this group that influences its development and permanence.

This business logic was seen by the Spanish colonizers as out-of-date and an obstacle to development, seen in the sense of capital accumulation, which is why they were increasingly exercising greater control and completely changing the work organization system.

Before the colonial era, commercial development in Mesoamerica was not subject to the logic of accumulation, but it was oriented toward social integration and the common good. It was probably because they did not have a conception of private property as in medieval European economy and were more under a collective logic of property.

The institutional control over the indigenous people that spread throughout the colonial period (more or less still existing even today), as a result of the economic and power relations developed over centuries, highlights that the modification of the work organization systems, of the access conditions to the land, the expansion of infrastructure, and literacy and language (Castilianization) have transformed their culture (Ramírez, 2006).

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Under an Indigenous Context

The regional context plays a very important role in the development of capacities for entrepreneurship. Each territory provides markets, infrastructure, production structures, resources, governance, and social and human capital that are reflected in the type and quantity of companies created in the region (Julien & Molina, 2012). It is usually approached under the metaphor of a natural ecosystem to incorporate the systemic approach, in such a way that it can explain its complexities and incorporate the elements that trigger it at various levels.

Although in most studies of the entrepreneurial phenomenon, the agency is privileged over structure, it is clear that a large part of academics emphasizes that the propensity to be an entrepreneur depends on the structural opportunities available to them (Acs, Autio, & Szerb, 2014; Smelser & Swedberg, 2005; Urbano Pulido, Díaz Casero, & Hernández Mogollón, 2007). The individuals' choices to start a business are limited by their education, culture, and social conditions (Kantis, Federico, & Ibarra, 2020) that expose them to experiences, expectations, and in general the conditions they face in society.

In the review of the literature in various databases, a large number of scientific publications of empirical works of entrepreneurial ecosystems were found in several countries, usually located in North America, Europe, and Asia that offer incentives to open businesses such as favorable fiscal policies, financing for seed capital, incubation schemes, among others (Cao & Shi, 2021; Mason & Brown, 2014; Tiessen, 1997; Velt, Torkkeli, & Laine, 2020). Quite the contrary in Latin America, where taxes and public spending are mostly blind to aspects of race and ethnicity, so they do little to reduce the poverty gaps between ethnic and racial groups (Lustig, Morrison, & Ratzlaff, 2019).

Likewise, it was identified that the main indices that value entrepreneurial ecosystems worldwide are: the Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Index (Bosma et al., 2021), Global Entrepreneurship Index (GEI) (Acs, Szerb, Lafuente, & Márkus, 2019), Index of systemic conditions for dynamic entrepreneurship (Kantis et al., 2020), and the Entrepreneurship Indicators Project (Ahmad & Seymour, 2008, pp. 1–18). These indices coincide in evaluating successful environments, in terms of the following outputs:

- Education, emphasizing entrepreneurship training
- Public policy and presence of business support programs
- Financing
- Technology transfer
- Infrastructure
- Economic conditions (market size)
- Market freedom and access barriers
- Culture and society

In all these factors, the Latin American region has faced great challenges. The scheme proposed by Kantis et al. (2020), which proposes entrepreneurial human capital as the main input to unleash the entrepreneurial phenomenon, can contribute to the discussion on the limitations of the Latin American region and especially of its indigenous population in business development.

In education, for example, the results of the tests of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA in Spanish) highlight the educational gap between Latin America and the United States, Canada, and European and Asian countries. The nine Latin American countries evaluated obtained a lower ranking than the average for OECD countries (Schleicher, 2019). In addition, the low achievement in education in the context of Latin American countries is a

result of lessons being taught in the Spanish language with little recognition of the linguistic and cultural plurality of the countries of the region and the languages, and seeing the indigenous conception as irrelevant and even undesirable (Barnach-Calbó, 1997).

In addition, another aspect that affects entrepreneurial human capital is social conditions and business culture. It is evident to those of us who live in Latin American countries that indigenous areas have been excluded from development. Indigenous communities face different development opportunities that translate into a lack of access to public services, health protection, culture, and the administration of justice versus other social groups. This pattern is observed in both developed and undeveloped countries, even when indigenous peoples are the majority of the national population. In Latin America, even when the contribution of women to rural development is recognized, and their role in different spheres (family, social, economic, and cultural) acknowledged, the lack of equity remains an unsolved problem (Echevarría & Ríbero, 2002; Ruiz & Castro, 2011).

The relationship between female empowerment and rural development can be analyzed and becomes more relevant in a productive enterprise from the perspective of indigenous women and perceptions of gender inequalities, where the results showed that beyond whether the enterprise has a gender perspective or not, which seems to have implications for the empowerment of women, is if they are the ones who self-manage their entrepreneurship (Mora, Meli, & Astete, 2018).

Consistently, many studies corroborate a strong correlation between indigenous areas and poverty (Cimadamore, Eversole, & McNeish, 2006; CONEVAL, 2018; Franco Parrillat & Canela Gamboa, 2016; Gollás, 2003; Ramírez Carrillo, 2017). The response to this situation is related to the historical-political conditions that subjected indigenous peoples to conditions that relegated their development opportunities and that continue to exclude them from development (Cimadamore et al., 2006; Hostettler, 2003; Ramírez Carrillo, 2017).

Indigenous people are not only victims of traditional and modern mechanisms of exploitation and oppression, but their condition worsens when, in addition, the invisibility and low importance of academia are added to the conditions that cause their poverty (Cimadamore et al., 2006).

Studies on the entrepreneurial phenomenon in the indigenous context are very scarce (Dencker et al., 2021; Kolk, Rivera-Santos, & Rufin, 2014; Vivarelli, 2013). It is necessary to open the debate on a disruption of the dominant Latin American economic model to change patterns of marginalization and allow individuals a greater recognition of their knowledge, capacities, and in general revalue their social and cultural technical knowledge to generate companies that promote their well-being and their regions.

Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Latin America

Research on the influence of ethnicity on entrepreneurship began in the last century. Classics such as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 2012) and *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* (Sombart, 2001) reveal how widespread religious canons and social structure have influenced the literature on the

development of entrepreneurship. Ethnic entrepreneurship is considered to be the business initiatives of people who share an ethnic origin and with it the same background of human, social, and economic capital that enables them to create specific market opportunities (Cederberg & Villares-Varela, 2019; Hikido, 2018; Pruthi, Basu, & Wright, 2018).

In a bibliometric analysis prepared by Indarti, Hapsari, Lukito-Budi, and Virgosita (2020), they state that the theories and perspectives applied in ethnic entrepreneurship studies originate in the classical literature in the social, cultural, and economic fields, which are often associated with immigration studies. Likewise, these same authors emphasize that the discourse on this subject is related to the cultural and economic roles of the ethnic groups to create a company and the representation of noneconomic factors that trigger the entrepreneurial spirit. Cultural factors are widely recognized as a cause of business creation under the institutionalist approach and are as important as economic factors (Verduijn & Essers, 2013).

It is widely recognized that social characteristics such as gender (Bojórquez et al., 2019), race (Knight, 2016), and ethnic origin (Romero & Valdez, 2016) influence how the entrepreneurial phenomenon develops. Although there is sufficient evidence that social variables limit or enhance entrepreneurship, these studies have been carried out under the *single-axis* approach, which limits the understanding of the impact of their simultaneous interactions. Inequality and the underlying problems associated with it are highly complex, so there is much room for further research from the perspective of intersectionality in the field of entrepreneurship, which is scarcely observed and is considered emerging (Dy & Agwunobi, 2018; Knight, 2016; Martinez et al., 2018).

Multiple social hierarchies, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class operate simultaneously, albeit to varying degrees at different times, allowing and limiting behavior through the unequal distribution of power, influence, material and cultural resources, and their accumulation over time throughout life, which shape the social contexts for business ventures. Therefore, entrepreneurship studies that have integrated intersectionality and that consider ethnicity have gained great attention among academics, professionals, and policymakers (Ilhan-Nas, Sahin, & Cilingir, 2011; Indarti et al., 2020).

In general, ethnic entrepreneurship is carried out by people who are of different origins than Caucasians, generally men (since this is implicit in the theoretical discussion) (Chaganti & Greene, 2002). In other words, ethnic entrepreneurship does not fit the archetype of a successful entrepreneur in the context of capitalist developed countries.

Ethnic businesses begin when an entrepreneur develops an initiative that targets other members of an ethnic community and meets their ethnic needs (Volery, 2007). But it also applies to entrepreneurial initiatives carried out by migrants in service areas considered undesirable in the countries where they are located (Chaganti & Greene, 2002), and in both cases, a pattern of connections and social capital is identified that supports their business ideas.

It highlights the subcultural dimension of ethnicity, how it is developed through social structures through which the members of an ethnic group are

linked to each other, and how these social structures used are immersed in a different culture for which they are adapted (Aldrich & Waldinger, 1990).

The multiple dimensions of the identity of Latin American indigenous people shape their lifestyles, which are embedded in systems of oppression and privilege that limit their opportunities to start and develop entrepreneurial activities. They have a unique worldview (Vázquez-Maguirre, 2019). Thus, De La Cruz, Bello, Acosta, Estrada, and Montoya (2016) point out that the forms of product exchange are always in tension, as a dialectic between the reciprocal relations of indigenous economies and the influence of market economies, regulated by a dialectic of value between community and capitalist forms, which goes through to a greater or lesser degree of the forms that the indigenous economy has taken today.

Indigenous people frequently face scarce opportunities in the labor market that favor their insertion into the informal economy as street vendors, domestic workers, peasants, ranchers, and artisans (Peraza-Noriega & Mendoza-Guerrero, 2015). Recently, there is an interest in analyzing the role of social enterprises in the regional development of indigenous communities, in whose conversation there is little empirical evidence from Latin America (Vázquez-Maguirre, 2019).

Their decision to pursue entrepreneurship or not is based on a combination of factors that include a precariousness of resources, ignorance of the laws, low level of human development, lack of language skills and writing (Romero & Valdez, 2016), lack of formal education and skills to start a business (Bojórquez et al., 2019). Moreover, we must be very aware that among the structural constraints faced by the food and nutritional security of indigenous peoples in Latin America, there are those tensions with the management and use of natural resources and the challenges of the sustainability of economic enterprises and the distribution of the benefits derived from them (ECLAC, 2017). The International Labor Organization (ILO), through its Sustainable Community Tourism Network for Latin America (REDTURS), is one of the efforts located in the region and supports projects of this type throughout Latin America. Other efforts are the Sustainable Community Tourism Network of Latin America (RITA) located in Mexico and made up of 32 indigenous companies or, in the case of Brazil, Community Tourism Network of Ceará (Tucum Network), or the Bolivian Community Solidarity Tourism Network (TUSOCO) created in 2003 or National Federation of Community Tourism of Guatemala (FENATUCGUA), or in Honduras, in 1987 when the La Ruta Moskitia Ecotourism Alliance was created.

It highlights that the attention for this type of entrepreneurship in the academic field arises from the interest of developed countries to solve their problems of migration and discrimination in minority populations. It has focused on marginalized business populations, typically migrants who share the same ethnic origin, mainly Mexicans in the United States (Cederberg & Villares-Varela, 2019; Peraza-Noriega & Mendoza-Guerrero, 2015; Romero & Valdez, 2016). Also, studies such as those of Coral Guerrero (2018) focused on the Ecuadorian Amazon (Kiwicha Community).

In this sense, a debate has emerged about the limits and scope of what the ethnic aspect means in entrepreneurship (Chaganti & Greene, 2002). The studies can be divided into two large groups: those associated with migration and those associated with minorities.

Given that the migratory nature excludes minority ethnic groups that have been living in developing countries for several centuries such as African Americans in the United States, Jews in Europe (Volery, 2007), and even Hispanics whose territory was annexed to the American Union but who have a common cultural heritage and are perceived as different by their race, ethnicity, or religion; other scholars have called the term minority entrepreneurship used to include them (Chaganti & Greene, 2002; Cruz, Falcao, & Barreto, 2018; Verduijn & Essers, 2013; Volery, 2007).

Ethnic Entrepreneurship: A Proposed Framework for Latin America

The study of ethnic entrepreneurship has been carried out from two main theoretical perspectives:

The economy of the enclave, term coined by Wilson and Portes (1980). This approach proposes that ethnic businesses are geographically concentrated in a delimited area of an urban area where a network of work, social, and commercial relationships are interwoven for the benefit of its members.

Middleman minority theory. This perspective explains the arrival of a stranger into a new locale (Chaganti & Greene, 2002; Nestorowicz, 2011). The concept was introduced by Bonacich (1973) and is applied to immigrant communities and their position in the economic and social structures of receiving societies. She observed that certain ethnic groups in different parts of the world occupied what appeared to be a similar position in the social structure: a position as “intermediaries” between the whole of society and the elites, producers and consumers, employers and employees. Such minorities were also concentrated in certain occupations, mainly commerce, although there would be others such as labor contractors, collectors, moneylenders, etc. (Bonacich, 1973). That is, he explained economic specialization in terms of business development for ethnic minorities. Both perspectives are also suggested by Pitre-Redondo, Cardona-Arbeláez, and Hernández-Palma (2017) when approaching indigenous leaders of Colombia in a postconflict context.

Both theoretical perspectives assume the problem of ethnicity in the context of migration, which has left out of this debate the study of indigenous ethnic entrepreneurship in their native peoples. Therefore, it is a knowledge gap that can contribute to understanding the complexities of the entrepreneurial phenomenon and generating public policies and support mechanisms for the development of indigenous peoples in their own countries and in a certain way influence the creation of job opportunities that inhibits them from their decision to emigrate to other countries.

Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward (1990) propose a model that contributes to the discussion of ethnic entrepreneurship. These authors present a model that integrates four key aspects in the entrepreneurial phenomenon; market conditions, access to ownership, predisposing factors, and resource mobilizations.

To understand ethnic business development, the model is built on three interactive components: opportunity structures, group characteristics, and strategies. According to Waldinger et al. (1990), opportunity structures consist of market conditions that may favor products or services oriented to members of a specific ethnic group, and situations in which a wider, nonethnic market is served it also includes the ease with which access to business opportunities is obtained, and access is highly dependent on the level of interethnic competition and state policies.

Another component is the group characteristics, which include predisposing factors such as culture, aspiration levels, ethnic social networks, general organizing capacity, and government policies that constrain or facilitate resource acquisition. So according to the model, ethnic strategies emerge from the interaction of opportunities and group characteristics, as ethnic groups adapt to their environments.

Another model proposed to illustrate how ethnic entrepreneurship unfolds is the one proposed by Volery (2007), which shows how the recognition, evaluation, and exploitation of business opportunities are influenced by psychological characteristics, information, and knowledge, which depend on the opportunities, structural, ethnic strategies, metropolitan characteristics, and group resources. For Volery, there are two different but interconnected dimensions in the entrepreneurship process: the ethnic dimension (elements outside the oval) that can influence the four dimensions, which are the psychological characteristics, information and knowledge, the creative process, and the heuristic thinking. Volery himself highlights that the business dimension (internal rectangle of the figure) exists regardless of the ethnic, cultural, or religious origin of a potential entrepreneur, but that it influences the search for business opportunities. It highlights that even people with the same nationality or the same ethnic group have differences that affect the way they recognize and seek opportunities, and therefore two different dimensions should be considered.

A new approach to ethnic entrepreneurship can be defined as business ownership among persons who share an ethnic origin and face similar challenges due to it. Regardless of where the business establishes, what gives it the quality of ethnic entrepreneurship is the cultural identity from which the entrepreneurial phenomenon develops.

Like the theoretical perspectives, the models presented do not include the perspective of ethnic entrepreneurs who undertake their businesses in their native context, where they may even be the majority, but still face other facets of discrimination. Although indigenous people are the majority population in many Latin American countries, the disarticulation of their productive systems in colonial times and Western acculturation that for centuries made them feel inferior and ashamed of their origins, beliefs, and language have made them strangers in their land.

The lack of visibility of their precarious situation for governments and their exclusion from their language, customs, forms of government, commercial and productive systems, etc. place them at a disadvantage concerning the mestizo population or with Western features.

Therefore, it is urgent and important to give them a place in the discussion of business systems and the entrepreneurial phenomenon and to develop policies that provide them well-being and, above all, trigger mechanisms of belonging and help to inhibit migratory patterns to developing countries in search of economic opportunities.

A new approach to ethnic entrepreneurship can be defined as business ownership among persons who share an ethnic origin and face similar challenges due to it, regardless of whether the business is opened outside or within its place of origin, what gives it the quality of ethnic entrepreneurship is the cultural identity from which the entrepreneurial phenomenon develops.

In this case and considering what has been addressed, a model of ethnic entrepreneurship is proposed (see Fig. 3) that will be explained from the challenges and limitations of the indigenous people in Latin America, especially the Mayan and Aztec cultures, and it is considered that it could be a point of departure to generate a rethinking of a new school of Latin American entrepreneurship, taken from its origins and extrapolated to the present day.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Latin American indigenous people face problems of racism and discrimination that limit their business opportunities and insertion into the formal market in their own native countries. Their business development can be compared to that of the United States, only in a much more precarious context. Low social and economic mobility can lead to a limited perception of commercial opportunities (ethnic and social barriers).

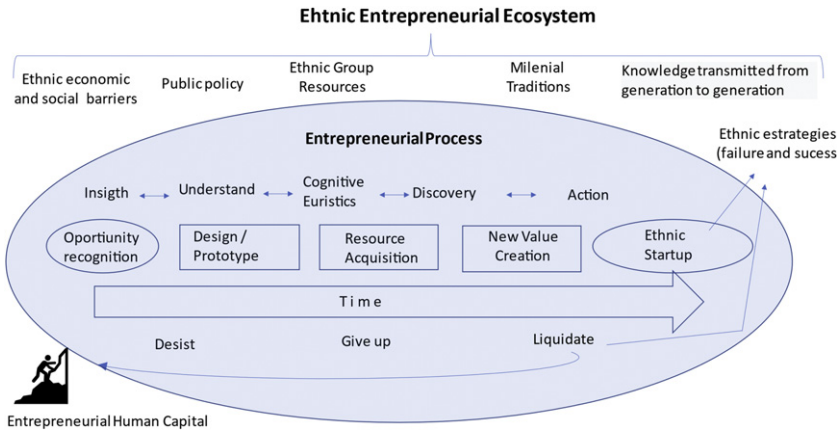


Fig. 3. Ethnic Entrepreneurship: A Latin American Native Perspective Approach. *Source:* Own elaboration.

The regional context plays a very important role in the development of entrepreneurial capacities. Each territory provides markets, infrastructure, production structures, resources, governance, social and human capital that are reflected in the type and quantity (and quality) of companies created in a region (Julien & Molina, 2012).

Public policy is another aspect that frequently limits entrepreneurship in the indigenous context since it is frequently centralized and focused on large cities with white populations. Likewise, it is rare that it is translated into the indigenous language and considers its access to infrastructure and public services. The presence of focused and specialized programs for the development of indigenous peoples can positively support them in this regard.

Ethnic group resources are another aspect that qualifies indigenous entrepreneurship opportunities. Resources are the natural and cultural assets that belong to or are strongly associated with indigenous people. In this sense, their natural landscapes, archeological remains, customs, costumes, and other aspects considered as belonging to their group can influence the type of enterprises they develop, such as the case of those that offer ethnic tourism services.

Like resources, ancient traditions can influence the way of doing business. It was separated from resources since a tradition is not physically observable and because it influences the composition and type of companies that are developed. Often the performance of traditional trades and activities obey gender distinctions, family legacies, and available natural resources.

Likewise, indigenous people often do not perceive their traditions as a business. An example of this is the situation reported by various national and international media that occurred in 2015 when a famous French designer included in her spring summer collection called *Marant Etoile* a huipil with characteristic embroidery of the Oaxacan Mixe indigenous community, and therefore Mexican authorities were considering legal action. This case revealed that the legal framework provides few guarantees and a lack of protection for Mexican handicrafts (Escobar, 2015; Larsson, 2015).

It is interesting that faced with the problem described above, Mixe indigenous people declared: "We are not a product that should be registered, we are a living culture and we have various cultural manifestations, including the huipiles." These statements make it clear that artisan activity does not obey the profit-oriented capitalist logic, but rather develops as a creative, religious, and social experience; as a cultural manifestation, so the value of these organizations goes beyond their economic and financial performance (Ranganathan, 2018).

A great challenge faced by indigenous people in their native countries is precisely the negative connotations of entrepreneurial activity. In general, entrepreneurs are strongly associated with chiefdom and clientelism (Adler, 2002). It should be noted that large companies in colonial times were owned by Spaniards and that they developed mechanisms of oppression and exploitation systems that marked the economic culture of Latin America, although the independence and revolutions that took place in the region tried to return control to the indigenous population, and their current situation makes it clear that this has not been achieved.

All these aspects of the ethnic entrepreneurial ecosystem shape the way the entrepreneurial process unfolds in the indigenous Latin American context.

The insights gained to develop the perception of business opportunities can be limited or enhanced depending on the particular indigenous context. Likewise, their knowledge and traditions can have an impact on the understanding of how to deal with these business opportunities and therefore on the design of solutions or prototypes for the market.

The acquisition of resources for entrepreneurship is perhaps the factor in which Latin American indigenous people may have the greatest challenges since their condition and the regions where their lives are strongly associated with conditions of extreme poverty and with a consequent lack of infrastructure and financial products.

If they face all these challenges and manage to overcome them, they can design a value proposition that, if it manages to enter the market, consolidates into a startup. Likewise, the results achieved in startups lead them to configure deliberate and emerging strategies according to the results they observe in companies with the same ethnic challenges.

Conclusions

There are great challenges for researchers in the areas of business and management in terms of designing suitable methodologies and instruments specifically to their regions, for the evaluation and development of strategies that allow their permanence and development of ethnic enterprises in native countries.

In this sense, this chapter provides a model that illustrates Latin American ethnic entrepreneurship from a different perspective than those that have addressed this phenomenon, one that does not assume that ethnic groups are migrants or part of a minority.

Based on an in-depth review of the origins of entrepreneurial activity in Latin America considering pre-Columbian commercial development, it was made clear that indigenous peoples start from a collective conception of property and that their commercial structure allowed them to create supply and distribution mechanisms that were dismantled in colonial times, but of which there are still some vestiges that can be seen in the modern flea markets and market on wheels.

A review of the state of the art of ethnic entrepreneurship was presented, and it was evidenced that it has put aside the vision of ethnic groups from their countries of origin, and a theoretical model was provided to explain the particularities they face in their contexts.

Although we are aware that this chapter is not a “conventional” handbook chapter, there is almost no literature for our region that captures our millennial civilizations that once lived and develop in Latin America, admired throughout the world for their achievements, as entrepreneurs as they were, nor about Ethnic Entrepreneurship applied in and for our territory. But this precisely also allowed us to propose a novel view and to make a call on reinventing the way entrepreneurship in our region is viewed and applied. It might be just the right reason why

our region lacks formal mechanisms to foster creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship, and built its model that recaptures its essence without any further theoretical importations from the western hemisphere.

Notes

1. In the Incas, the “quipus” devices, coded to send nonverbal messages, which consisted of the main cable with several woolen ropes knotted at different distances, and the transmitted code had to do with the number of knots and the position of the ropes. It is believed that it was to record and communicate the amount of inventory in warehouses. Also famous is its highway system (still in use today) of more than 40,000 km. of extension.
2. Unique look as entrepreneurs, since it appears that history and archeology address this activity throughout their inventions, their commercial activity, and/or their markets, where few or no times it is seen from the perspective of entrepreneurship, and this is, as the origin of the LATAM’s entrepreneurial space, where echoes of it still persist in today’s indigenous, peasant, or rural communities settled throughout the region.

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